

## **Klara Rosa Zeiler (nee Görigk)**

Born March 23, 1924 Linglack (Ostproußen) – now Poland



Klara was one of 6 children born to Franz Görigk and Rosa Hasselberg in Linglack Ostpreußen; she had 4 brothers, two older (Benno and Leo) two younger (Bruno and Alfons) and one older sister (Erna). They were a German farming family but also had relatives in the nearby community of Paulsen, where they went to church and were baptized. They all lived in the same large house with surrounding farm and most travel was done via bicycle or horse and buggy, which is also how most of the farm goods were transported to other communities for sale or trade.

Klara went to school until age 14 as most of the other children and then was required to help around the farm or assist with the younger children or older grandparents. German was her native language.

In January 1944, the Russians were slowly moving across East Prussia, which Germany had just conquered. They forced people to herd farm animals together and to work for the soldiers looking after these herds. Many people escaped, but others stayed, doing what the Russians asked, for they made great promises.

As part of the occupation the Russian army took over half of the large house using it for their office and living quarters. They came and went as they saw fit. On March 10, 1944, they returned, and took all the men, including Klara's father (her older brothers were already in the army). Giving up hope of ever getting home again, her father died five days later of a broken heart.

On March 24, the day after Klara's birthday, the Russians came and picked up all the young girls. Klara and her sister Erna tried to hide but she was found and taken; her sister Erna was lucky enough to run away. Erna along with their mom and many other relatives in the area became refugees and were driven off their land. The Russians told Klara and the others to bring some clothes along, as they would be gone working for a couple of weeks. They wanted girls 16 years of age or older but not married. In Klara's group were fifteen girls. The soldiers took them in a truck to a town not far away, where they remained for three days. They kept moving the girls from one place to another, combining them with other groups. They were kept in jails and halls until the next transportation was ready. Food was scarce and bathroom facilities were crude.

By Easter Monday there were 1,500 young women; some were taken from their children. They were put into boxcars and traveled eleven days. They ate only dry bread and water and could go to the bathroom twice a day. The bathroom was only a hole cut in the floor of the boxcar. They arrived in the Karelian A.S.S.R., the border area between Finland and the Russian S.F.S.R. There they walked across ice for two miles. They had to work in heavy bush from eight to ten hours a day. They ate only soup and bread and slept on wooden bunks without mattresses. The work consisted of clearing bush, making roads, and piling wood. They worked very hard, and if they managed to do more work than the quota, they would get a little more food. There were Russian soldiers on guard all the time. The girls were counted when they went out of the camp quarters

and again when they came in. What kept Klara going was that they were told, "Not much longer and you will be going home."

Every night eight to ten girls died from malnutrition, diphtheria, and desperation. Since no mail could be sent for two years, no one knew where they were. After two years, the Russians allowed those who were ill to go home. But it is not known if they actually arrived at their homes.

At this time Klara and a group went to the Ural Mountains in Russia, to the city of Chelyabinsk, where she remained for two and one-half years. They did a variety of work, including clearing bush, working in a factory making asbestos rings for stoves, cleaning streets, building canals, working in a pulp and plywood mill, and cooking. The facilities were better here. They slept on straw sacks and had bed covers. During the last two years they were even paid. There were forty to fifty girls in a dwelling. They did what they could to make the best of the situation and have fun (likely why they survived), and those who learned to speak some Russian became the captains of their group. It was not as strict as before. They could go to the occasional movie, and some Russian boys even took them dancing. However, the girls would not allow the boys to take them home, and sometimes, if they were afraid of the boys, they would run home from them. In the Urals there was a concentration camp, holding 3,000 prisoners. They had the occasional dance, which Klara and two other girls attended once in the winter.

After two years the girls were permitted to write letters - one every six months but limited to only twenty-five words. In the last year (the fifth) they could write a letter every month, but when Klara wrote home, she received no answer. She then realized that her family was no longer living in her hometown. Perhaps they were no longer alive. But she tried other sources and in a roundabout way found that her mother had moved to the next town.

One day they were told that they could go home and were released at Frankfurt an der Oder (border and customs). Here was a camp for displaced persons to stay until they found their relatives. Klara



Klara in Linglack.

wired her mother, who by now lived north of Berlin. Klara noticed that the Russians were happy and laughed, while the East Germans looked sad and never smiled. It was now 1949. She learned that her two older brothers were killed in the war and that her sister and younger brothers were still alive.

Klara met her mother and they decided that she should get out of East Germany. The only way to do this was to go back to the authorities and say, "My relatives are not here anymore." Unknown to the East Germans, an uncle in France was assisting Klara. Once she was through the legalities, she was permitted to leave East Germany, and she wired her uncle who was in Rhineland. In West Germany Klara went to a clinic for a check-up (a routine requirement). She was placed in a children's hospital for four weeks rest. She had water on the knee, low iron content, and suffered general malaise. After her release she went to Goch, Germany, where her brother lived. Soon after that her mother and other members of her family arrived.

Erna, Klara's sister, who was married to Horst Thoman, had come to Canada in 1952. Horst had been a German POW in Lethbridge, Alberta, during the war. Since Klara at the time had a nice job with good pay in a doctor's home, she wasn't too interested in coming to Canada. But her two younger brothers and her mother immigrated to Canada in 1953; therefore, Klara joined them as well. All of them wanted to forget the memories and hardships of the war. They crossed the Atlantic, arriving in Quebec City and rode the train to Regina, where they all settled. However, the younger brothers, their wives and her mother missed Germany very much, and by 1961 all but Klara, Horst and Erna returned to West Germany. Erna and Horst moved to Victoria later in 1961 leaving Klara alone in Regina.



Bruno (brother); Rosa (mom); Klara, Erna (sister, Horst brother-in-law); Donna and George (niece and nephew).

At first Klara missed her good job and her friends in Germany. She struggled with the English language and the winters in Saskatchewan were a difficult adjustment. But she soon found new friends within the strong German community in Regina, where she could continue conversing in German. Gradually too she appreciated the freedoms which she could enjoy in her new “home”.



Tony, Klara, and son Gary (1962), Regina.

In Regina Klara met Tony (Emmeran) Zeiler who was born in Mariental (Odessa district), Russia, and who had immigrated to Allan, SK in 1951 where he had an uncle, Rochus Zeiler. Tony moved to Regina two years later to find work. They met through the German community and regular dances at the Trianon ballroom. Klara worked as a seamstress in the sewing room at the Regina General Hospital and Tony worked as a plasterer and later also worked in the hospital in laundry services. They were

married in 1962 and had one child Gary (wife Sue) and has two grandchildren Natasha and Nicholas. After Gary was born, she became a homemaker and spent time looking after the family and helping her friends when needed. Later in life she became a part time home cleaner to bring in extra income for holidays to Hawaii which she loved, joining many of their German friends enjoying the weather, playing cards, swimming and just relaxing. After the hardships they endured in their lives, they were deserving of the comforts of a lovely home, good food and freedom.





The Family back together in Germany  
 Left to right – Bruno and Ursula Görigk (brother and sister-in-law); Klara Zeiler, Erna Thoman (sister), Alfons & Edith Görigk (brother and sister-in-law); Tony Zeiler (1990), Goch Germany.

After her sister and family moved to Victoria in 1961 the Zeiler family in Saskatchewan and the Regina German community became her local family and they all depended on each other for what you would expect of family. Klara loved to cook and spend time with the many friends she made in Regina, and they really became her family. They celebrated, birthdays, Christmas, and other major events together as family (brothers and sisters). Almost every summer there was an annual trip to Victoria to see Erna, Horst and their children George and Donna. It was important to Klara that the families

remained close to each other. As well, there were many trips to Germany over the years to visit her and Tony's families.

She kept up her German language and heritage by sending her son to German school and her friends always spoke German first, though it is very much a mix of German and English today. She was always involved in the German club, in the Frauenverein (ladies club) and seniors club. She enjoyed making her favorite Torte or two along with many other German dainties for Oktoberfest, Mosaic or special events at the club and helped when needed. Her lady friends enjoyed regular Kaffeeklatsches to celebrate birthdays and got together to play cards (which she loves) and to enjoy each other's company, reminisce and pass the time.



Kaffeeklatsch, Regina.

Klara is the only surviving member of her direct family, her two older brothers being killed during the war, and her sister Erna passing away over the last 5 years. She now lives in a care home in Emerald Park, Saskatchewan close to her son and grandchildren.

--written by Gary Zeiler, August 2022

## **Emmeran (Tony) Zeiler (October 4, 1923 – October 18, 2001)**

Emmeran Zeiler, known to everyone as “Tony”, was born in Mariental, Russia in 1923. Mariental is approximately 25 kilometers west of the port city of Odessa on the Black Sea.

Tony grew up in Mariental and got an education equivalent to our grade seven. Tony was already married when in early March 1944, the “German Military Command” ordered all inhabitants of German descent, to depart for Germany, from Russia. They settled in Poland, which was occupied by Germany at the time. Eva (first wife) and Tony began their flight on March 28, 1944, to West Prussia with all the other Zeiler relatives. Tony and Eva's son was born in West Prussia, and they wanted to name him George, but Germany would not allow that; therefore, they named him Leopold. All the men, including Tony were taken into the German Army in the Fall of 1944. In the spring of 1945, Russia took control of Poland, and took all German people to Siberia, including Tony's wife and 6-month-old son, Leopold. Tony never saw them again.

When the war ended in May 1945, Tony was a prisoner of war (POW) in an American army concentration camp in Belgium from Easter, April 1945, to November 29, 1947. He worked in coal mines without pay. Living conditions were so deplorable that many died. Tony had a friend in camp who was released six months after Tony arrived. This friend went back to his hometown, Portdorf, near Hanover, Germany. On Tony's release he was invited to his friend's home. Soon after, he met a man from his hometown, Mariental, and learned that his cousin, Magdalena Zeiler Kocher was in the area, also looking for their uncle, “Rochus Zeiler”, who had immigrated to Canada in 1927.

Tony made contact with his uncle in Canada who assisted in obtaining the visas to immigrate to Canada. When Tony's papers were cleared, he sailed August 4, 1951, from Bremerhaven, Germany. The sailing took 9 days and docked in Quebec City, Quebec. The train trip took 3 days and on August 17 he arrived in Allan to the joy and surprise to all.

He spent to 2 years in Allan working on farms and then moved to Regina to work as a plasterer where he met Klara and they later got married.

-written by Gary Zeiler, August 2022